



Review Article

Women's Political Participation in India: Their Social Identity and Empowerment

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Abstract

India is a democratic country. In a democracy, everyone should have equal rights irrespective of caste, creed, and religion. The Constitution of India guarantees equal rights to all its citizens, irrespective of their religion, caste, creed, or sex. There are three types of government in India. Central Government, State Government, and Local Self-Government. A brief overview of women's participation in government at these different levels will be discussed in this article. The struggle for women's suffrage is the empowerment of women through political participation. position of women in Indian society. And how women's emancipation happened by removing gender discrimination in India. How have women achieved their civil and social rights? What is the position of women in Indian politics? And above all, what is the socio-economic impact of women's participation in politics?

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INTRODUCTION

Simply put, feminism is a thought or ideology and a kind of social movement. The core of this argument revolves around the question: Who is the woman? What defines her identity? And what are her social, political, economic, cultural, and family statuses? Feminism emphasises how women must defend their free, secure, and open positions at the family and public levels. The supporters of this ideology advocate equal rights for women as well as for men in society. Women's rights in the family, in the workplace, in education, and in the social sphere are to be protected and improved. Women are discriminated against in every sphere of society. There is no modern or contemporary discrimination against women. It is not confined to any one country or community. Be it the past or the present, in every country of the world, in every social system, women have been exploited. It is therefore necessary and relevant to study such issues in order to secure the position of women. It can be said that this feminist approach is the theory and its application for the emancipation of women and the establishment of equal rights for women in society by removing gender inequality in society.¹ The establishment of women's rights in society is not only discussed in feminist theory. The establishment or re-establishment of the rights of any backward class in society passes through a long struggle. The establishment of women's social recognition, political rights, economic rights, and above all, the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women based on gender, has also been driven by long waits and protests.

Women in society: In the modern social structure, most of the social systems are patriarchal in nature. In this form of society, what a woman should do is determined by her father, husband, or son. Women have long been excluded from social life, education, economic rights, political participation, etc. Men are the dominant force in decision-making in political, economic, cultural, and other spheres. That is, it is understood that women could not participate in the decision-making process of the mainstream of society. But in order to build a healthy, cultural, and civilised society, equal rights must be provided for all. Everyone should be given equal opportunity. A social system can run smoothly only when people from all strata of society are aware of their rights and duties. But at all levels of society, women are being discriminated against.

In the family system of patriarchal society, the girl child is a victim of ridicule from birth. The birth of a son is more enjoyable for the family members than the birth of a daughter in the family. Because they believe that the Son is the future of the family. Therefore, the reluctance of the family members towards both the girl child and the mother giving birth to the girl child can be observed. In many cases, family members are observed to be aware of the health, education, work, money, and rights of the son as he grows in the family. There is no conscious behaviour in the upbringing of the girl child. Instead, there is more interest in the marriage of the girl child. The property of the family is inherited by the sons. Whether or not a woman is available is optional. And they think that's normal.

However, it needs to be mentioned here that in many modern states, including present-day India, women's rights to inherited family property are legally established.

Women's participation in education is limited. There are hardly any women in higher education. Women's intelligence is considered low or questionable. However, there are many examples of how women can develop their intelligence if they have the opportunity and the right environment. At present, women's education is considered important in society in different countries. Article 21(a) of the Indian Constitution provides for free and compulsory education to all boys and girls in the age group of 6 to 14 years. Various policies have been adopted by the central government and various state governments to promote women's education. Such as *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*; *Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV)*, etc. A girl child is given equal opportunity for education as a boy child is. The benefits of this include female students contributing to studies like their male counterparts. The number of women in higher education has increased.

In most societies, women are undervalued. Women's work is limited to being domestic workers. Child rearing, taking care of all the children from the elderly in the family, cooking, decorating, and maintaining the house, etc., are tasks that are limited to the home. These tasks are important and necessary in the family. None of these tasks are of low importance. However, it should be noted that these jobs are not considered labour in society. That is, there is no dignity in these tasks of women's domestic work. With the changing times, women are no longer limited to household chores. At present, women are employed in the government sector, the private sector, and the unorganised sector. Small and medium-sized enterprises operate on their own. There are many examples of upper-class women leading large businesses or industries. In this way, women have empowered themselves and contributed to the growth of the family. At the same time, violence against women in the workplace is on the rise. The patriarchal society does not take well to women working outside the home. At work, women are often paid less than men. Many organisations are facing the same problem. At the workplace, they are subjected to physical, mental, and emotional abuse. However, in many modern countries, including India, efforts have been made to change this situation through legislation. Many male colleagues work closely with their female colleagues and stand by them in times of crisis and support their demands.

Protecting women's rights and establishing dignity in society is not a benevolent thing. It's their human right. All people, regardless of gender, have the right to live with dignity. And for this, we need state recognition and constitutional and legal recognition. Women's participation in politics is very important. It can be said that women's participation in politics and their voting rights are needed before reforming society. Because politics is present in almost every sphere of society. The government and the people decide what should be done in society. Just as society influences politics and state policy, so do the state and politics influence society. The majority of political decisions are made by men. Therefore, the political

policy of the state is determined from the point of view of men. The influence of men's views is evident in the policies adopted by the state. Women's rights are no exception. What is suitable for a woman is determined from the masculine point of view. So it can be said that the real empowerment of women is not possible as long as the place of women in the family, in society, and in the state is determined from the patriarchal point of view. Like some other important driving forces of society, the participation of men in politics is high. It is not easy to find women in this field. By the nature of a patriarchal society, it is uncomfortable for men to accept the subordination of women or to accept women as peers. It is acceptable for women to be under the control of men, and this is considered normal. How did women participate in politics in such a hostile environment? How do they gain the right to vote? This article will discuss her place in politics and what she has contributed to politics.

History of Feminism, key Milestones: There may be different opinions among political scientists about how the feminist movement started, when it happened, and who started it first. But feminism is a protest against the exploitation of women in a patriarchal society. In almost every patriarchal society, women are victims of physical, mental, and sexual abuse and domestic violence. Even basic human rights are being denied. And it's not just local or regional. In every part of the world, in every age, protests and demonstrations were held at various places. Some of these events have historical evidence; some do not. However, in the context of the discussion, it is assumed that the feminist movement was born in the developed countries of Western Europe, such as France, Britain, and Germany. It is thought that the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution, and the Revolution to Abolish Slavery, which took place in Western Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries, influenced feminist ideas. At this time, women raised their voices against gender discrimination. They demanded equal rights for women as men in society. English feminist philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) was the first to coherently articulate the position of women in society and the demands for improving their status. In her book 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women' (1792), she highlighted the problems of women and examples of discrimination against women by gender. She spoke about women's rights, women's education, and women's dignity in society. Mary Wollstonecraft's book was the first theoretical foundation of the feminist movement. Mary Wollstonecraft is considered a major figure in the modern feminist movement. However, the term 'feminism' began to gain popularity in France in the 1870s. Earlier, it was called Women's Freedom or Emancipation. In 1882, Hubertine Auklet, a leading French feminist and a campaigner for women's suffrage, used the term 'feminists' to describe herself and others working for women's freedom. In France in 1882, people who advocated for women's political rights and women's freedom described themselves as 'feminists.' From the 1890s onwards, the term gained popularity in Britain, then in the United States of America, and gradually throughout the world. And in the end, it can be said that the appeal for the protection

of the cultural, economic, and political positions of women in society has been made for many years in different societies.

The feminist movement has never been uniform. Feminism has been discussed from different points of view at different times. For example, 'liberal', 'Marxist', 'radical', 'postmodern', etc., are defined from different points of view. Again, different demands of the women's movement have been raised at different stages at different times. Briefly, these terms are discussed.

Liberal feminists demand equal opportunities for women in society. They want to live with dignity in the family and in society. They want to participate in the political, social, and educational fields. And for this, they want to achieve their demands through social reforms and legal changes. These are also considered to be the demands of the first wave of feminism (1848-1920). Feminists of this school of thought include Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott (organisers of the Seneca Falls Convention), and Susan B. Anthony, who are remarkable.

Marxist feminists blame the capitalist social structure and the culture of capitalism for this neglect of women in society. They believe that in the capitalist social structure, economic rights are controlled by men. Therefore, to eliminate discrimination against women in a patriarchal society, women must be given the right to labour, the right to equal pay for equal work, the right to ownership, and above all, economic rights. Feminists such as Alexandra Kollontai, Silvia Federici, and Selma James are notable.

Radical feminists believe that the patriarchal structure of society, which is male-dominated and male-controlled, is based on gender inequality. This is the main cause of this condition. So they call for the complete disappearance of this patriarchal society. They call for the creation of an entirely new social structure to protect women's rights. These are also known as the second wave of feminism (1963-1980). Some of the proponents of this style include Betty Friedan, Angela Davis, and Simone de Beauvoir.

Postmodernism is a slightly alternative view of feminism. Postmodernists do not regard feminism as universal. They see the position of women through a special comparison. For example, the rights of a woman belonging to an upper-class household go hand in hand with the rights of a woman belonging to a lower-class household. The rights of a girl in a remote village with the rights of a woman in a metropolis. Comparison of women's rights in underdeveloped countries with women's rights in a developed country. By this criterion, they present feminist problems. In this view, individual freedom is given special importance. Rebecca Walker, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Judith Butler, and others share this view. And this corresponds to the third wave of feminism (1990-2010).

And in the present day, in the age of the internet, the way women are presented is as a product on social media. The women's movement takes place against the distorted mentality that is being created about her physique, sexual appeal, etc. This is known as the fourth wave of feminism (2010-present day). This is a brief history of the feminist movement. The feminist movement had a significant impact on the

establishment of women's rights in various countries, including India.²

Feminism in India and its nature: Like other patriarchal societies in the world, Indian society is patriarchal in nature. Atrocities against women are on the rise in Indian society. Female infanticide, child marriage, the dowry system, the purdah system, disinheritance, exclusion from the realm of education, and male subordination in the family have been prevalent in Indian society for ages. Even pernicious customs like the Sati system and the Devadasi system were prevalent in Indian society. Although there are many reasons for this oppression of women in Indian society, one of the reasons is considered to be religious fundamentalism and superstition. India is a religious country. Religion has a great impact on Indian society. There are many religions and castes in India. Religious identity is much higher in Indian society than other identities. Many positive aspects of religion have helped shape Indian society. Similarly, those who used religion in a perverted way to stay in power and lead society have had a bad effect on Indian society. Some superstitious and fundamentalist policies of almost every religion keep women away from the mainstream of Indian society. The woman will be within the family circle, and her only duty is to take care of the family. That's the main goal, nothing else.

However, many efforts have been made to change this pathetic condition of women in Indian society. During the period of social reforms in India in the 19th and 20th centuries, social reformers gave special importance to the emancipation of women and the establishment of women's dignity. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Keshav Chandra Sen, Mahatma Phule, Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, and Mahadev Govind Ranade were prominent intellectuals who were enthusiastic about establishing the status of women through social reforms. They highlighted the importance of ending the practice of Sati, ending child marriage, introducing widow remarriage, ensuring women's participation in education, and providing legal protection to protect women's rights, etc.³ Although the movement against gender discrimination in India began with the reformation of male society, Pandita Ramabai, Rani Chenamma, and Ramabai Ranade, the chief female intellectuals, have long fought for the emancipation of women. Their contribution to women's education, women's health, women's dignity, and women's rights will always be remembered.

Women's participation in Indian politics: Women's participation in Indian politics dates back to the period of India's freedom struggle. Women also spontaneously joined the country's freedom struggle against the colonial power. Rani Lakshmi Bai, Sarojini Naidu, Aruna Asaf Ali, Kasturba Gandhi, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Matangini Hazra, Pritilata Waddadar, and Captain Lakshmi Sahgal are some prominent examples. Although the names of some leading women are mentioned, countless thousands of other women joined the country's freedom struggle. It is pertinent to mention here that the participation of women in Indian politics was influenced more

by nationalist ideologies than feminist claims. Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, and others emphasised women's participation in politics. There was spontaneous participation of women in Gandhiji's non-cooperation movement and Satyagraha movement. Many women's organisations were formed during the freedom struggle, such as the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC) and the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW). During the British rule in India, women from some upper classes of society in some provinces (Bombay and Madras) got the right to vote in 1921. At the time of the framing of the Constitution of India, there were 15 women representatives in the Constituent Assembly of India. Among them were Ammu Swaminathan, Annie Mascarene, Begum Aizaz Rasool, Dakshayani Velayudhan, Durgabai Deshmukh, Hansa Jivraj Mehta, and Kamala Chaudhary. They made a lot of effort to secure the rights of women of all classes in independent India. The Constitution of India guarantees the right to vote to every citizen of the country, irrespective of caste, creed, colour, sex, or gender. The right to vote is a fundamental right under the Indian Constitution. As a result, women's right to vote, contest elections, and, above all, political participation in India has been legally protected since the Constitution came into effect in 1950.⁴

Women's empowerment through political reservation: To increase the participation of women in Indian politics and to empower women in politics, the demand for reservation of seats in politics has been raised by various political parties at different times. This claim has a long history. Demands to ensure women's participation in active politics have been raised at various times. This issue has been discussed not only in the recent past but also since the time of the Constitution. Some supported the claim, while others did not. Prominent members of the Constituent Assembly, such as Renuka Ray and Sarojini Naidu, were opposed to the reservation. They felt that this reservation would make women feel weak and that women would be looked down upon. Therefore, they did not take the issue of women's reservation in politics well. The Women's Reservation Bill was introduced in the Indian Parliament for the first time on 12 September 1996. Various discussions were held in this regard, but the bill could not be passed as various regional political parties did not support it. Between 1998 and 2014, various central governments introduced the Women's Reservation Bill in Parliament four times but could not muster a majority in support.⁵

However, in the special session of 2023, the women's reservation bill named Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (106th Constitutional Amendment) was passed with 454 votes in the Lok Sabha and 214 votes in the Rajya Sabha. According to the bill, one-third or 33% of the total number of seats in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies will be reserved for women. However, it needs to be mentioned here that this reservation is set to come into effect from the next census (estimated 2026) onwards or from the period of the 2029 Lok Sabha elections. So the focus will be on what happens in the future. The reservation of women in Indian politics has been made not only at the

national level or at the provincial level, but also in the rural self-government system. The Indian Constitution made provisions relating to the establishment, powers, and responsibilities of Panchayats (for rural governance) and municipalities (for urban governance) through the 73rd and 74th Amendments, respectively, in 1993. This reform has not only helped in empowering women. It has helped the weaker sections of society, including the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, to participate in politics. As women have been elected as representatives as a result of the Panchayat reforms, arrangements have also been made so that women can lead at the block level and district level. According to the democratic structure of India, giving autonomy to the Panchayat system has not only empowered women politically. Along with this, women have been able to participate in the socio-economic development projects of the panchayat. And she has also contributed to social justice.

The Impact of Women in Indian Politics: The policies taken by various governments at different times for the participation of women in politics have also been beneficial. In Indian politics, women have not only voted in elections, but they have also contested elections and participated in the policy-making process. Positive aspects of women's participation can be seen at the national, provincial, and local self-government levels. In this independent India of about 80 years, women have reached leading positions in politics and served the country. So far, there have been two women presidents at the national level, Pratibha Patil and Droupadi Murmu. Indira Gandhi was the first woman prime minister of India. Many women politicians have held many important ministries at the cabinet level, such as Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Sushma Swaraj, etc. Women leaders like Meira Kumar and Sumitra Mahajan have been elected as Lok Sabha speakers. At the provincial level, more than 30 women have served as governors from the post-independence period to the present day. Prominent among them are Sarojini Naidu, Padmaja Naidu, Kamla Beniwal, and Margaret Alva. And in different states of India at different times, women chief ministers have led the state government. So far, 18 women have become chief ministers in different states. Some of these notable names are Sucheta Kripalani (first female chief minister), Jayalalithaa, Mayawati, Mamata Banerjee, Sheila Dikshit, and Vasundhara Raje. Women's participation in both the upper and lower houses of parliament has increased. While the number of women MPs in the first Lok Sabha (lower house) after independence was 24, the number of women MPs in the 13th Lok Sabha increased to 49 in 1999, while there were 78 women MPs in the 17th Lok Sabha in 2019, which is the highest to date. There are 74 women MPs in the 18th Lok Sabha in 2024.⁶ On the other hand, when it comes to the

number of women MPs in the Upper House, it is known that in 1952, the number of women in the Rajya Sabha was 15, which is 6.9% of the total members. However, in the current period of 2024-2026, the number of women has increased to 17% of the total number of members, which is about 40 people. However, the number of women in the Lok Sabha or Rajya Sabha is much less than that of men. Hopefully, this will change in the future. Women are more empowered in politics. However, the situation is a little different in the panchayat system. The participation of women in the panchayat system has increased to a great extent. The seats reserved for women in the rural self-government system through the 73rd constitutional amendment have reaped benefits. According to a recent report of the Ministry of Women and Child Development of the Government of India, there are 14.5 lakh elected women representatives in the Panchayats across India, which is 46 per cent of the total members. And as many as 21 states have provided for the reservation of 50% seats for women in their panchayat systems through the introduction of laws. For example, some states like Bihar, Odisha, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, etc. The Government of India has taken up a special training program called 'Sashakt Panchayat Netri Abhiyan' to enable women to lead the Panchayat system in a more assertive manner. And through various other policies, the government has tried to empower women in politics.⁷

Conclusion: It is not possible to know whether women have been empowered in politics only by giving rights and by judging the statistics. And it is also not correct to say that all the women of society have been empowered because some women have reached leading positions. More important is the role of policies adopted by the government in the overall development of women of all sections of society. It is very important to know whether the problems faced by women in society have been solved. Because there are many examples where a woman is in a leading position in politics, but she is being controlled by a man, these things should be considered with utmost relevance. But India is a democratic country. Women in India have been empowered not only in the political sphere but also in the social, economic, and family spheres as a result of policies adopted by the government. And this is expected to improve over time.

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